

# The London Free Press

609



## MAKIN' MUSIC

Pink Floyd's David Gilmour takes a solo flight while Van Morrison rides a country road.  
TODAY D3



## LOST NO MORE

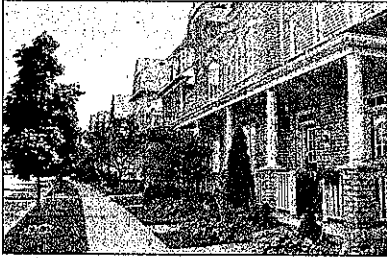
Evangeline Lilly hits her stride on the TV drama Lost.  
TODAY D1

Cloudy, breezy, high - 11 low - 40  
Abrahamson page B2

SATURDAY, MARCH 18, 2006

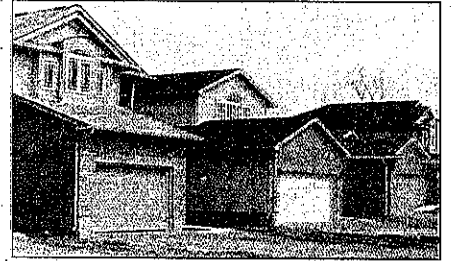
www.lfpres.com section A

## A TALE OF TWO SUBURBS



"People live here"

A group of London planners, developers, builders and urban designers wants to change the face of London communities to make them more liveable, like Oak Park, at left, near Oakville, rather than those commonly built in the London area, at right. Free Press reporter Randy Richmond examines what is being called 'placemaking' in a four-part series. Page A10

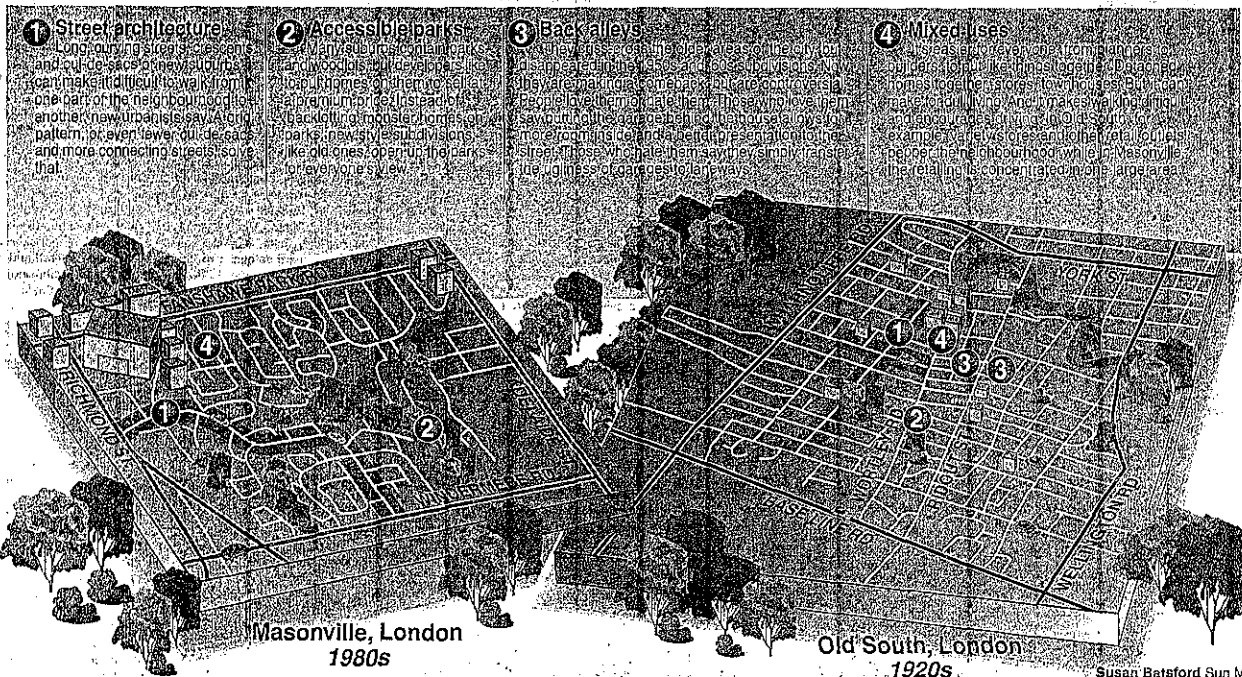


"Cars live here"

# A TALE OF TWO SUBURBS

# They call it placemaking

## EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN



**1 Street architecture**  
Long, curving streets, cul-de-sacs and dead ends make it difficult to walk from one part of the neighbourhood to another, new urbanists say. A grid pattern, or even fewer, cul-de-sacs and more connecting streets solve that.

**2 Accessible parks**  
Many suburban plans park a woodlot or a park at the end of a cul-de-sac. Instead, backlots, green alleys, parks, new-style subdivisions like old ones, open up the parks to everyone's view.

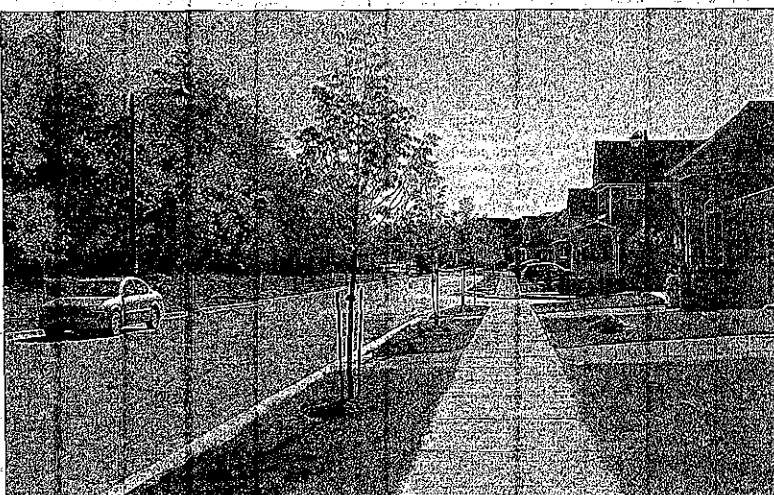
**3 Back alleys**  
They are easy to see on the old areas of the city, but they are making a comeback. They are making a comeback. They are making a comeback. They are making a comeback.

**4 Mixed uses**  
As a rule, you can't find a grocery store, a pharmacy or a bank in a suburban subdivision. Instead, you have to drive to a shopping centre. New-style subdivisions are making a comeback. They are making a comeback.

Suburbs don't have to look like 'human filing cabinets' with no distinctive features, say a growing number of planners and builders. Free Press reporter Randy Richmond looks at some elements that could soon be coming to London.

**F**iona Hickey's house and yard would flip London on its side. And maybe its attitude. When she walks out of her house with her two children, she takes only a few steps to reach the street. She wanders past neighbours on front porches who are within earshot of a quiet hello. Streets wind but do not block her way or trap her into dead ends. On the way to the school, she can rest in a little park with a few benches. "It's a friendly place. There's a real community feel here," she says. Hickey moved to this subdivision in Milton from a typical Ontario suburb in Mississauga, with narrow lots, no fronts to speak of, cul-de-sacs and huge empty parks that you had to drive to in a car. "The first thing you saw on every house was a garage," she says of her old neighbourhood. Her old neighbourhood sounds like many in suburban London. The new one sounds like nothing in London. John Fleming, the city's manager of land-use planning policy, wants that to change. The economic and, for lack of a better word, aesthetic future of the city depends on it, he says. "People are looking at more than economic opportunity to determine where they want to live, particularly those that are highly sought-after in terms of their skill sets," Fleming says. "They are looking for great cities and London is a great city." To keep it that way, though, the suburbs have to improve. Through the fault of no particular party, London has built suburbs that, Fleming says, "simply are not good enough for us." Although downtown redevelopment gets much of the political attention in London, the development of the suburbs is just as important, Fleming says. "We are leaving a legacy. We're city building." City staff, several key developers, one of Canada's pre-eminent urban design experts and others have embarked on a plan to create a new style of subdivision. Elsewhere, that style is called new urbanism, new suburbanism, smart growth. In London, Fleming is calling the process "placemaking," partly to avoid the controversy that the other terms, used now for a couple of decades, have inspired.

The essence of all the terms is "growth that supports strong economies, develops high-quality communities and protects the environment," Fleming says. "Take a look at this," Fleming says, putting up a photograph of a new urbanism neighbourhood marked by graceful porches, busy street life, garages in the back alley and houses close to the street, then putting up of a typical London suburb with garages dominating the street. "People live here," he says of the first neighbourhood. "Cars live here," he says of the London neighbourhood. "They even built pillars on either side of the garage to give importance to the entrance for the car." Fleming has created what he calls a palette of placemaking ideas that city staff, consultants and developers will narrow down over the next while. The palette for placemaking includes:  
► **Street layout:** The long rambling streets of twists and turns and cul-de-sacs commonly seen in suburbs can make it difficult to walk from one part of the neighbourhood to another, new urbanists say. A grid pattern of streets, or even fewer cul-de-sacs and more connecting streets, solves that.  
► **Public spaces:** Many suburbs contain parks and woodlots, but developers like to put homes on them to sell at a premium price. Instead of backlotting monster homes on parks, new-style subdivisions open up the parks for everyone's view. "At the centre of a community or close to the entrance, woodlots and parks can define a neighbourhood. "Wouldn't it be nice to come home at the end of the day, coming down the street and seeing a woodlot or park?" asks urban design expert Michael Hannay, part of the placemaking team. "This is the image you take to put all the green space in one spot because it's easier to build and, from the city's point of view, easier to maintain. New urbanists like to see parkettes dotted throughout neighbourhoods — simple, nicely landscaped places with a few benches, where people can sit for a while and share a coffee with neighbours. For the same reason, some new-style neighbourhoods have built in commercial elements, a coffee shop for example.  
► **Lot design:** Key to placemaking principles are a radical change in house design. Traditional suburban homes of the past 15 years are on relatively narrow lots. The size of lots, as well as city rules, prompt developers to build garages in front of houses. With small or non-existent front porches on houses dominated by garages on streets extra wide to allow utility companies to lay all their lines side by side, it's no wonder people have no connection to their streets and neighbours. In presentations, Hannay likes to show a painting by Londoner Jack Chambers, Sunday Morning No. 2, of two boys in the 1960s watching television in their front room. "The boys are sitting in natural light from a large front window. They can see the trees and yards and street outside. "Just from the view inside that room... it allows you to predict the entire environment around that house," Hannay says. There are yards and neighbours and life. "It says something about an integrated, predictable view of the world, which gives us a sense of place. You know where you are. That is a tremendously important thing." Hannay adds, "We have to tame the garage." It's easy to turn lots to their sides, as they are in Hawthorne Village in Milton, making them wide and shallow and putting the garage beside the house, say planners. Or, they say, try:



**VIEW FROM HERE:** Instead of boxing in parks by lining their boundaries with the backyards of monster homes, new-style subdivisions open up the parks so that everyone can see them.

► **Back lanes:** They are easily the most controversial aspect of new urbanism. People love them or hate them. Those who love them say putting the garage behind the house allows for more room inside and a better presentation to the street. Those who hate them say they simply transfer the ugliness of garages to laneways. Besides, they say, back laneways that are shut off from houses attract crime and garbage and are a costly to build, light, plow and otherwise maintain. "The jury is out as to whether this is something that we would want," Fleming says. "There are positives because streets certainly look great with no cars out front, but there are some issues."  
► **Architectural variety:** The cookie-cutter approach of slapping the same style house on each lot is thrown out for new-style suburbs. A variety of styles with strong architectural features, such as front porches, peaked roofs and dormers, mark new-style suburbs. But even new urbanists made mistakes, such as nothing but fancy gingerbread Victorian-style facades crammed into every square foot of frontage. Nowadays, the styles range, but the feeling of a more old-school street remains.  
► **Gateways and centrepieces:** The way into a subdivision should be the way into a neighbourhood and community, say new urbanists.

In some subdivisions, the main road showcases nothing but backyards behind huge noise walls. Corner lots show the blank brick sides of houses. In new-style subdivisions, corner houses are given two facades, perhaps with a wrap-around porch, so that each street gets a view of something architecturally interesting. Instead of having suburbs blocked by main roads with huge noise walls, new-style developments have streets perpendicular to the main arteries so that no noise walls are needed.  
► **Mixed uses:** It's easier for everyone, from planners to builders, to put like things together — detached homes, stores, townhouses. "But it can make for dull living. There are dozens of other ways to turn subdivisions into more walkable, pleasant neighbourhoods, say designers. Each one alone would mark a shift in the way Londoners live. The ultimate goal, says Fleming, is a little more soul, a little more sense of place, in our communities. "When people think of sprawl, they think of these endless suburbs, human filing cabinets where there is no real sense of difference between a suburb in Markham, Brantford, Windsor or London. "If I were to blindfold you and drop you into a suburb in one of those communities, you likely wouldn't know where you were. This is what people object to."

Wouldn't it be nice to come home at the end of the day coming down the street and seeing a woodlot or park.

Michael Hannay, urban design expert

**THE SERIES**  
TODAY: Placemaking  
TOMORROW: ...  
WEDNESDAY: ...  
THURSDAY: ...  
FRIDAY: ...  
SATURDAY: ...  
SUNDAY: ...